



Condo, retail development planned for museum site

A Baltimore company says its plans for a former city power plant will include a scaled-back Heritage Harbor Museum.

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PROVIDENCE -- The dream of a state history museum lives on, just a little smaller.

A plan for a scaled-down version of Heritage Harbor Museum surfaced yesterday with the surprise announcement that the museum has partnered with a commercial developer.

The museum corporation selected Struever Bros., Eccles & Rouse to develop a \$50-million condominium and commercial complex in conjunction with the museum at the former Narragansett Electric Company power plant.

The Heritage Harbor Corporation had originally intended to occupy the entire span of the empty power plant with life-sized exhibits including a sailing ship and a triple-decker. Under the new plan, the museum would squeeze most of its exhibit space into the "400 Pound House," a massive room that represents about one-fourth the power plant.

"They would still have exhibits, but the exhibits would be scaled down from what we all read about a few years ago," said Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission.

Struever Bros., the developers behind Rising Sun Mills in Providence and Royal Mills in West Warwick, plans to rehabilitate the 1903 electrical plant with the help of historical tax credits. The company wants to create 40 condominium units mixed with office and retail space, while maintaining the exterior of the plant. It will also renovate the museum space.

"We are really very excited that we were chosen to co-develop the building with them," said John Sinnott, of Struever Bros. "They've had some ups and downs, but we corporately believe that Providence and Rhode Island really need this type of museum."

The development adds to the growing inventory of more than 450 proposed condominium units in downtown Providence. The location also is the gateway to the soon-to-be-revealed waterfront, a result of the Interstate 195 relocation.

"We think it's going to be a big draw and fit into the whole redevelopment and set the tone for the whole part of the harbor," Sinnott said. "We are tickled pink."

The Heritage Harbor Corporation's acting director, Margaret Dooley, was on vacation yesterday and could not be reached. Donald Deignan, a member of the board of directors, refused to talk about the development deal and referred all questions to Dooley.

The museum corporation has been searching for a private developer for about a year. The group had publicly predicted a developer would be named last July, but the announcement never came.

It was just another disappointment in the troubled story of the museum.

Rhode Island is one of only a handful of states that does not have a museum dedicated to its own history. The effort to build one began a decade ago. The founders rallied support, partnered with historical groups, won an affiliation with the Smithsonian Institute and found a location. Narragansett Electric donated the site. The museum group garnered more than \$43 million in pledges and Rhode Island voters approved a \$5-million bond to help pay for construction.

The scope of the project grew, too.

Planners envisioned a large museum, a library, archives and storage space for various collections. They also proposed offices for a dozen or so cultural groups and large spaces for public events.

The Rhode Island Historical Society, one of major drivers behind the Heritage Harbor Museum, withdrew its support in 2002, but not before funneling thousands of man-hours into the project and creating financial problems within its own organization.

Bernard Fishman, executive director of the society, cited several reasons for the leaving the museum effort: the Historical Society didn't believe Heritage Harbor's business plan was viable, the society's own mission didn't align with the museum and the cost to participate was too high.

Later that year, the museum corporation -- which still didn't have any exhibits -- eliminated 7 out of 18 staff positions, including the executive director.

Yesterday, Fishman said he was curious about the museum's new business plan and said he'd be open to talks on renewing a relationship with Heritage Harbor.

Sanderson, of the state historical commission, is encouraged by the museum's new partnership.

"I think the broad goal can still be achieved, which was to recognize the culturally diverse history of the people of Rhode Island, particularly through 19th-century and 20th-century immigration and the important role of that immigrant population in working in mills and developing communities across the state. That is still the theme and I think that still can be achieved."

Sanderson toured the power plant with the Struever Bros. developers several weeks ago. Inside, the steelwork and giant spaces create a Gothic cathedral effect, he said. Sanderson said he

believes Struever Bros. has proven it can deal with industrial buildings successfully, both in design and economically.

Struever Bros. is renovating the 500,000-square-foot Royal Mills in West Warwick into apartments and condominiums. The \$69-million Rising Sun Mills project will convert the 130-year-old mill complex at 166 Valley St., in Providence, into office space, apartments and retail shops. In another Providence project, the company is rehabilitating 60 Valley St. into 15 live/work studios for artists, 14 apartments and commercial space. The company is overseeing the renovation of Fenway Park's Green Monster and has completed many harborfront rehabilitations around the country.

George Goodwin, past president of the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association, is cautiously optimistic. The group has raised more than \$500,000 for the Heritage Harbor project and had planned to relocate its offices there. He said he'd love the museum to come to fruition, but his organization will study the new plan closely.

"The basic concern is not philosophical, it's practical. It's financial," he said.

Marie Truppa, president of the Italian American Historical Society, was delighted by the news of the museum's partnership.

"We want the Italian-American story to be told and we believe that it can be told beautifully at Heritage Harbor," Truppa said. "We are optimistic and hopeful, but at the same time, the past couple of years have been frustrating."

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